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PROXY VOICES: FOREIGN MEDIA FIGURES IN RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

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This article analyzes the role of foreign content producers from third countries within the Russian propaganda ecosystem during the Russo-Ukrainian war. It argues that these actors, often presenting themselves as independent journalists or commentators, perform a dual function: they are used by Russian media to demonstrate alleged international support for Russia, while simultaneously targeting audiences in their countries of origin to undermine trust in mainstream media. Focusing on Anne-Laure Bonnel as a case study, the article shows how cautious rhetoric, selective framing, and appeals to narrative complexity are used to relativize responsibility for Russian aggression and normalize pro-Kremlin interpretations of the war.

Keywords: Russian propaganda, information warfare, Russian-Ukrainian war, alternative media, Anne-Laure Bonnel, pro-Kremlin narratives.

Introduction

During the Russian-Ukrainian war, especially during the four years of the full-scale invasion, support for Ukraine in Western media became the mainstream position, and support for Russia became the alternative. Over the time of the full-scale invasion, the proportion between the two positions varied, with the pro-Ukrainian consensus significantly eroding over time, but pro-Russian sentiment never dominated.

In order to turn the situation around, the Russian information machine has been systematically recruiting marginal content creators from third countries, giving them exclusive access to the front lines on the Russian side and a platform to promote their names on Russian or Russia-controlled platforms. As a result, a whole category of pro-Kremlin content producers (media activists/ propagandists/ information warriors/ disinformation actors/ bloggers/ commentators, etc), who may or may not call themselves journalists, has emerged. Sonja van den Ende (Netherlands), Patrick Lancaster (USA), Russell Bentley (US), Graham Phillips (UK), Lu Yuguang (China), Anne-Laure Bonnel (France), Eva Bartlett (Canada), Vanessa Beeley (UK), Vittorio Rangeloni (Italy), Anne-Laure Bonnel (France), Lucas Leiroz (Brazil), Johnny Miller (UK), Robert Dissa (Mali), Adrien Bocquet (France), Andrea Lucidi (Italy), and many others. Most of them have been or regularly work

on the front lines of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the Russian side. Some of them have distinguished themselves by their extravagant positions on other highly salient issues, such as supporting and spreading conspiracy theories, taking an anti-vaccination stance during the Covid-19 pandemic, or supporting the Assad regime in Syria.

The purpose of the article is to recreate the mechanics of the functioning of pro-Russian content producers from third countries in the Russian propaganda system.

The dual role

Thanks to all of the content producers listed above, Russian media can systematically refer to them as external, unbiased commentators, foreign journalists who are unbiased observers of this war. For example, *Sputnik News* quotes Sonja van den Ende as saying: “The majority of the people whom I spoke with were very happy that the [Russian special] operation has started”, the Dutch journalist says. “Of course, nobody wants violence and war, but they have been suffering already eight years from the war, carnage and destruction by the Ukrainian forces. The worst were the Nazi battalions, who were fighting along with the regular army”¹. On the other hand, she actively works with the Dutch-speaking audience, in particular through her *YouTube* channel, as well as through resources that claim to be distributors of “alternative information”. For example, in *Fresuriah* she writes: “The Ukrainian army had taken up residence in the factory and sent the workers home or held them hostage and used them as human shields, as happens throughout Ukraine, particularly in Mariupol, where many supporters of the AZOV regiment can be found”. Vittorio Rangeloni released a documentary titled *Witnesses* about the Ukrainian attack on the Luhansk administration in June 2014, and organizing photo exhibitions in Italy. *La Nazione*, a mainstream, established Italian newspaper quotes him on this occasion: “Reporting on something that differs from conventional information is not easy”, explains Rangeloni. “The war in Donbass is a complex topic that in Italy is too often treated superficially, fomenting dangerous hatred rather than clarifying the situation. I am trying to publicize the research I have been conducting since 2015 into this scenario of civil war and geopolitical conflict”². Robert Dissa from Mali recites Pushkin at the Mariupol Theater and organizes Russian-Malian Cultural Days in Mali³. Patrick Lancaster produced a report on “soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces who joined the Russian Armed Forces” and also gave an interview to Tucker Carlson offering a pro-Russian interpretation of the war. That is, in almost all cases, Russian propaganda uses these people both for internal audience in Russia and for external audiences in the countries from which they come.

Anne-Laure Bonnel as a case study

Unlike many of the other media figures mentioned above, Anne-Laure Bonnel does not use pro-Russian rhetoric indiscriminately, but tries to moderate her position. Instead of

¹ Blinova, E. (2022), “Dutch Journo: ‘We are Here, in Donbass, to Awaken Westerners Deluded by MSM Propaganda””, April 8, available at: <https://2cm.es/1mCo3> (visited January 8, 2026).

² Guidoni, S. (2024), “Mostra di foto sulla guerra in Donbass”, 15 dicembre, disponibile presso: <https://2cm.es/1hF98> (visitato l’8 gennaio 2026).

³ Peruchon, L. (2024), “Propaganda Machine: Russia’s information offensive in the Sahel”, *Forbidden Stories*, November 21, available at: <https://2cm.es/1hF8y> (visited January 8, 2026).

denying the fact of “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine”, she prefers to explain it in a way that is favorable to Russia.

This can be illustrated by her participation in an October 2024 talk show on the French far-right television channel *TVL*, where she adopted a cautious rhetorical strategy – avoiding categorical language while repeatedly stressing that explaining Putin’s perspective does not equate to justifying it: “Putin feels encircled. If you read Brzezinski’s *The Grand Chessboard*, it becomes clear... There is, after all, a strategy of using Ukraine as a buffer state to prevent the expansion and power of Russia, or the Soviet Union, and any rapprochement with European countries. It was a strategy”. Having said so, Bonnel sums up: “It is terrible what Russia did on February 24, 2022. It is terrible, but it was so predictable”⁴. This strategy of Anne-Laure Bonnel deserves closer consideration.

Two documentaries about Donbas

Anne-Laure Bonnel made an attempt to make a name for herself in France by releasing documentaries about Donbas in 2015 and 2022, which she shot from the Russian side of the front. Both films boil down to the same idea: Ukraine is bombing Ukrainian civilians.

The first documentary opens with a pseudo-quote from Ukrainian President Poroshenko, which has been widely circulated in Russian media. Poroshenko’s words are taken out of context in such a way as to make it appear that he is threatening the residents of Donbas with a lack of jobs, pensions, and opportunities for children to study⁵. Then, Bonnel travels through the territory controlled by the DPR, talking to people who talk about war crimes committed by the Ukrainian army: bombing of civilian homes, war crimes, executions, and bullying. The events in Odesa on May 2, 2014 are described in the biased manner in which Russian propaganda usually describes them: representatives of the Right Sector came to Odesa, drove pro-Russian activists into the trade union building, and set it on fire. An uninformed viewer would have the impression that the actors in this war are the Kyiv government on one side and the Russian-speaking residents of Donbas on the other. Russia as a state is mentioned twice:

- At the moment when white trucks from the “Russian humanitarian convoy” were shown for 32 seconds;
- At the end of the documentary, when a female protagonist says: “The biggest mistake is to believe that it is the Russian army that is making war here”. And her husband from behind her says: “if the Russian army had a war here, in a week we would have had peace”.

Bonnel’s documentary *Donbass, eight years later* was filmed in early March 2022. This film is also characterized by the typical vocabulary (“Pro-Russian population”, “referendums on self-determination in Donbas”) and typical accents (Victoria Nuland handing out cookies on the Maidan) of Russian propaganda. Then there are tendentiously selected quotes that would portray the Ukrainian side in an unattractive light. All of these are the prerequisites under which Russia launches its “special operation”, in the context of which this special operation, according to Bonnel, should look natural. Despite the fact that

⁴ *TVL* (2024), “Gaza/Ukraine: Galactéros sans interdits – Bistro Libertés”, disponible chez: <https://2cm.es/1mCmF> (consulté le 8 janvier 2026).

⁵ See about this fake: StopFake (2014), “*Lies: Petro Poroshenko Promised that Children from Donbas would be Sitting in Cellars*”, November 15, available at: <https://2cm.es/1hF83> (visited January 8, 2026).

Russia is conducting the special operation, Bonnel's documentary is entirely about how Ukraine in March 2022 kills civilians in Donbas, shelling apartment buildings and schools. The stories of victims and eyewitnesses testify to the "crimes of Ukraine". Unlike the first film about Donbas, Bonnel herself appears in the frame several times, especially when she shows corpses and pools of blood without blurring. At the end of the film, Bonnel crosses the demarcation line that has divided Donbas into two parts since 2015. In the territory that was until recently under the control of Ukraine, there are also a large number of buildings destroyed by artillery, but this time Bonnel does not try to explain to her viewers through the comments of local residents who is responsible for this destruction⁶.

Breakthrough into the mainstream media space

Bonnel's first notable success, a breakthrough into mainstream journalism, was her article in *Figaro* in March 2022 (later removed from the *Figaro*'s website): "The suburbs of Donetsk are in similar chaos. On Monday, February 28, the city was subjected to yet another shelling by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. One building was damaged. The streets are empty; people were evacuated several days ago. Exhausted people take cover as if on command, 'Get down!' and fall silent, as if this helps them escape a shell. Men of draft age, overcome with genuine anger at all this, have all gone to mobilization centers. Their patriotism is genuine. When a young soldier is asked why he went to the front, the answer comes naturally, from the heart: 'To protect the residents from the Nazis'. Here, everyone is unanimous in the opinion that the war is being waged against the 'Ukrainian aggressor.' Everyone unanimously condemns the 'growing influence of the American empire' in Europe, everyone criticizes NATO and Zelenskyy. Soldiers proudly pose for photos, weapons in hand"⁷. After the article was removed, Bonnel drew attention to this fact, showing it as an act of censorship by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies⁸.

Another notable information booster for Bonnel was a quote from Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister on March 3, 2022. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* referred to Anne-Laure Bonnel as "Heroine of Russian Truth". In an article dedicated to her, the German newspaper writes: "...Lavrov referred to a 'French journalist' and advised the French president to take note of what Anne-Laure Bonnel reported. 'She was in the Donbas and covered the destruction of a school. The murder of two teachers. She appeals to the West to face the truth': that, according to Lavrov's interpretation of the film, it wasn't Putin, but Ukraine that started the war. Western propaganda, however, refuses to acknowledge this. Lavrov catapulted Anne-Laure Bonnel into the headlines of the world press and social media as a 'French journalist being censored by Macron'"⁹.

⁶ YouTube (2022), "Donbass, huit ans après", disponible chez: <https://2cm.es/1mCmJ> (consulté le 8 janvier 2026).

⁷ Bonnel, A.-L. (2022), "Ukraine: dans le Donbass, là où tout a commencé", *Le Figaro*, 4 mars, disponible chez: <https://2cm.es/1hF7t> (consulté le 8 janvier 2026).

⁸ YouTube (2022), "Journalists Anne Laure Bonnel being intimidated by Ukrainian police", available at: <https://2cm.es/1mCKP> (visited January 8, 2026).

⁹ Altwegg, J. (2022), "Heldin der russischen Wahrheit", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11. März, erhältlich unter: <https://2cm.es/1hF5v> (Zugriff am 8. Januar 2026).

On March 3, 2022, an article dedicated to Bonnel was published by *La Libération*¹⁰. The article analyzed several important points about the journalist and her work.

– The nature of her documentary about Donbas: the passive role of a journalist who is being carried around Donbas by separatists, “False things, which have been debunked many times, fables concocted by Russian TV and which Anne-Laure Bonnel’s guides magically put under her nose” (a quote from *Twitter* by Benoît Vitkine, correspondant of *Le Monde*). Another case that suggests that Bonnel is not looking for stories herself, but is presented to her ready-made by the Russian side: the resonant video of a French journalist with two dead bodies in Donetsk on March 1, 2022, was filmed near the location about which a similar news story was covered by the Russian news agency TASS.

– The manipulation about 13,000 victims of the war in Donbas. This is an estimation made by the UN, but it includes victims on both sides of the front, mostly military. In her speeches, Bonnel repeatedly presents it in such a way that one can think about 13 thousand civilian victims as a result of the bombing of the civilian population by the Ukrainian army.

– The narratives that Bonnel promotes are picked up by Russian propaganda, using it as a lone “voice of truth” in a whirlpool of anti-Russian “disinformation”.

Bonnel’s key narratives about the Russian-Ukrainian war

A closer look at the video posted on *YouTube* on December 20, 2023 on the *Le Dialogue* channel will be helpful. For almost 45 minutes, Bonnel speaks mainly about the Russian-Ukrainian war and Ukraine, revealing her understanding of the most important aspects of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Bonnel consistently refers to “information warfare” and emphasizes the manipulative role of the media in shaping coverage of the Russian–Ukrainian war. This is central to the alternative narratives she promotes, as she first needs to undermine trust in mainstream media and their dominant narratives before advancing her own interpretations. The journalist rejects accusations of pro-Russian bias, instead criticizing French media for relying on videos produced by the Ukrainian army, while emphasizing that she has consistently used her own footage.

The war in Donbas in 2014-2021 and the origins of the full-scale invasion.

According to Bonnel’s understanding, a civil war is going on in Ukraine during this period: “Donbass¹¹ was the trigger for the civil war in Ukraine and the continuation of it was the February 24 invasion, but what happened in Donbass in 2014 and should have been given more consideration: there was already strong tension between two parts of Ukraine”.

After Ukraine rejected the people of pro-Russian Donbas, it continued to treat it badly, isolating the region and not providing any humanitarian aid, having stopped paying salaries and pensions, bombing the region; fencing off Donbas with checkpoints through which people could neither leave nor enter without authorization from the Kyiv government. All this provoked, in her opinion, “the societal breakdown of these populations could no longer

¹⁰ Roche, M. et al. (2022), “CheckNews. Qui est la journaliste française Anne-Laure Bonnel, censurée, selon Moscou, pour son travail sur le Donbass?”, *Libération*, Mars 3, disponible chez: <https://2cm.es/1mCjv> (consulté le 8 janvier 2026).

¹¹ As most pro-Russian speakers, Bonnel uses Russian toponymy: “Donbass” instead of “Donbas”, “Odessa” instead of “Odesa”, “Dnieper” instead of “Dnipro”, and so on.

live together, especially in light of the Odessa massacres (50 people burned alive)... They no longer had a sense of belonging..."

Bonnel rejects the unambiguous interpretation of Russian-Ukrainian relations in the categories of "aggressor–victim". Instead she prefers to describe it as: "It's very complicated". She continues: "And as in all wars, all conflicts, and all international relations, whatever they may be, nothing can be reduced to a simple division between a camp of good and a camp of evil... It is simply the management of national interests, which played out in the heart of Ukraine and which generated this storm and this terrible war today..."

This is followed by the idea that Ukraine has become a victim not of Russia, but of objective circumstances: "It's a country that, unfortunately for it, is poorly positioned". The country was divided within itself, the West of Ukraine aspired to Europe, while the East wanted to be close to Russia. That is, what happened to Ukraine next, follows from objective reality. The use of passive forms regarding the territories occupied by Russia is characteristic, for example: "Donetsk and Luhansk were lost earlier, as was Crimea".

In addition to Ukraine's destructive role, Bonnel notes the US contribution to the war. She suggests that Russia was provoked: NGO funding and election interference in Ukraine caused "a feeling of insecurity on the part of the Russians, who felt being surrounded".

The role of France, Europe and the West. "Providing humanitarian support to a country under attack is perfectly legitimate. War is terrible, and Russia has not respected international law", Bonnel admits, immediately balancing the negative assessment of Russia: "Although to my regret, the Minsk agreements were not implemented" (obviously, Ukraine did not implement them).

The strategy of France, Europe, and the West in the Russian-Ukrainian war is particularly manifested in anti-Russian sanctions, which, in Bonnel's opinion, are ineffective and useless. "This sanctions policy was very perverse", since China continues to cooperate with Russia. According to Bonnel, "everyone needs to learn to collaborate and stop their arrogant approaches, instead considering each other's viewpoints. We can no longer afford, as we have for years, to define what constitutes the camps of good and evil; it no longer works, it no longer resonates, and that is the major shift: the loss of American and Western diplomatic influence".

Who wins and who loses the war. Ukraine fell into its own trap, having invested in narratives supporting its victory. Bonnel says: "You mobilized a film festival to support you, you made announcements all over the world, you received a standing ovation; backing down is virtually impossible. Because you committed a country, you committed families, mothers, who believed, who sent their children... So how can you reverse course after a massive communication campaign?"

French media persistently "hammered" that Ukraine would win: "We sold an inflated hope". This was a mistake: "We underestimated Russian capabilities... We made an arrogant bet that we were superior". In other words: "The European Union... remained fixated on "we will win" and I think everyone wanted to believe it... I think everyone was honest in believing in the Russian defeat".

Bonnel then resorts to romanticizing Russia (underestimated by the West in her opinion): "The Russians have the capacity for constant renewal. They have a heritage that we no longer possess. A heritage of historical awareness and a sense of war, and that largely

eludes us. I saw it firsthand when I went to Russia". Bonnel recalls the memorials to the "Great War" and the "Second World War" that she saw in Russia, and then concludes: "It's part of their DNA. They fight, they fight".

Even when it comes to Russia's failures, Bonnel claims that these failures are merely apparent: "The failure in Kherson... But we still need to find out if it was a failure, because I remind you that they retreated, dare we say it. It is terrible for the Ukrainians, because they [the Russians] knew that they would lose people, so they decided to regroup in another place, moved to the other bank of the Dnieper. And we sold it as a victory, and the whole world believed it"¹².

Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates that foreign content producers constitute a distinct and strategically important component of the Russian propaganda system during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Their value lies not in mass reach, but in symbolic capital: nationality, linguistic proximity to Western audiences, and the ability to present themselves as independent witnesses to the conflict. By leveraging these characteristics, Russian media can simulate pluralism and international legitimacy while advancing narratives that align with state interests.

The dual role performed by these actors – addressing both Russian domestic audiences and foreign publics – allows propaganda messages to circulate across information environments that would otherwise be resistant to overt state messaging. In this sense, foreign content producers function as intermediaries who translate Kremlin narratives into rhetorically acceptable forms for Western audiences.

The case study of Anne-Laure Bonnel illustrates that propaganda effectiveness does not necessarily depend on explicit falsehoods or aggressive rhetoric. Instead, strategies such as selective framing, contextual asymmetry, moral relativism, and the systematic questioning of mainstream media credibility can be equally powerful. By presenting the war as overly complex, inevitable, or driven by abstract geopolitical forces, responsibility for aggression is diffused and the agency of Russia as a state actor is minimized.

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¹² YouTube (2023), "Anne-Laure Bonnel: 'Le Donbass a été le déclencheur de la guerre civile'", disponible chez: <https://2cm.es/1mCoQ> (consulté le 8 janvier 2026).

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ПРОКСІ ГОЛОСИ: ІНОЗЕМНІ МЕДІЙНІ ФІГУРИ В РОСІЙСЬКІЙ ПРОПАГАНДІ

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У статті досліджено роль іноземних медійних фігур із третіх країн у системі російської пропаганди в контексті російсько-української війни. Починаючи з 2022 року, після повномасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну, проукраїнська позиція стала домінантною у провідних західних медіа. Водночас Росія зіткнулася з обмеженими можливостями впливу на західні інформаційні простори через втрату довіри до власних державних медіа. За цих обставин російська пропагандистська машина почала системно залучати іноземних медійників, – громадян США, країн ЄС, Канади, Латинської Америки, Африки та Азії, – які виробляють і поширюють інтерпретації, узгоджені з інтересами Кремля. Їхня діяльність позначена системною інтеграцією в російський інформаційний простір: вони часто працюють із російського боку фронту, їх активно цитують російські державні та напівдержавні медіа, використовуючи як «зовнішні голоси», покликані підтверджити правдивість російських наративів. З одного боку, ці медійні фігури виконують внутрішню функцію, слугуючи для російської авдиторії доказом того, що позицію Росії «розуміють» і «підтримують» на Заході. З іншого боку, вони орієнтуються на зовнішні авдиторії у країнах походження, де їхній статус «очевидців» війни використовують для підтримки довіри до провідних медіа та легітимації альтернативних, проросійських інтерпретацій подій.

На окрему увагу заслуговує діяльність французької документалістки Анн-Лор Боннель. На відміну від багатьох інших проросійських медійних фігур, вона уникає грубої риторики та відкритого заперечення факту російської агресії. Натомість Боннель застосовує більш витончену комунікативну стратегію, яка ґрунтується на поясненні погоді із вигідної Росії позиції, без формального виправдання її дій. На основі аналізу її документальних фільмів про Донбас, телевізійних виступів і публічних інтерв'ю показано, як за допомогою селективного добору фактів, асиметричного контекстуалізування та апеляції до «складності» конфлікту формується наратив, у якому відповідальність за війну розмивається.

Ключові слова: російська пропаганда, інформаційна війна, російсько-українська війна, альтернативні медіа, Анн-Лор Боннель, прокремлівські наративи.

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